Alex Farmand

Ms. Krafft

AML 2410, Section 8974

12 September 2013

Presentation 1: Happiness in *The House of Mirth*

Happiness is the ultimate achievement people can obtain. Achievement of happiness is when one feels joy and has an understanding of what the concept of success is for that person. In all ages and cultures, happiness is a subjective concept. Happiness can be brought into a person’s life through his or her passions, friends, family, religion, love, social acceptance, and wealth. These aspects of life are considerably the most important things that may cause someone to experience joy, anxiety, and other emotions. In *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, the characters are challenged by these elements of life, but they especially struggle to possess wealth, social acceptance and love. The novel is essentially centered around events that are motivated by money. The characters in *The House of Mirth*, specifically the women, are driven by an idea of happiness that can only be achieved through financial success. Lily Bart and the other women of the novel clearly have a false image of happiness.

In *The House of Mirth*, wealth brings power and happiness. The idea that money can buy someone happiness is a theory that has been proved and disproved by different people through history. Realistically, it is unfair to make guidelines for how to reach happiness because all cultures are very different. However, considering the community and setting of the novel, the characters in *The House of Mirth* have a poor idea of what happiness is. The novel takes place in the late nineteenth century when Americans felt the struggle for money and when class distinction was very apparent, so a desire to become financially adequate in society was a common anticipation. Still, is this unusual in comparison to other cultures in other periods of time? Everyone is constantly seeking money because it helps relieve stress in the household. When a family has money, they can afford food, shelter and other important needs, decreasing the pressure on whoever the provider for the family is. In *The House of Mirth*, the situation is not any different. More than anything else, greed and laziness influence the attitudes that the characters in the novel, especially the women, have about money. For example, Lily is upset when she learns that she is only inheriting $10,000 from her aunt. She needs and expects to receive more because she does not have a job and is in debt. Lily does not have any desire to belong to a lower class and is never satisfied with her life until her last few days on Earth, for her whole life is a journey to become wealthy so she can belong in high society. She realizes at the end of her life, with the help of Nettie, that all that she had strived for did not bring happiness upon her (Wharton 257).

Lily believes that wealth is only valuable if it also brings her social acceptance. She longs to fit in and be desired by those in the upper class, thinking that popularity will make her happy. However, while trying to mold herself to fit the social norm of the upper class, Lily sacrifices her pride and dignity and eventually fails. The idea of living among the rich fascinates Lily and controls her life, doing more damage than good. For instance, Bertha Dorset controls her circle of friends in the upper class by manipulation, which Lily becomes a victim to when Bertha starts a rumor that Lily and her husband George are having an affair. Lily was hoping that on the trip to Europe she would gain approval from the rich, but they instead shun her. Later in the novel it says, “What debt did she owe to a social order which had condemned and banished her without trial? (Wharton 244)” Since Lily is not married to a wealthy man and is threatening to other women because of her beauty and kindness, she is automatically associated with wrongdoings that are not true. She realizes that she will never be able to fit in with the people she once admired because she finally “ learned by experience that she had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines (Wharton 244).” The happiness she thought she would acquire from being friends with the higher-class people is shown false when she has a flash of depression and feels “a sudden pang of profound loneliness (Wharton 245)” toward the end of her life.

Love is the third thing that the characters of the novel have a flawed impression about. Love is universally known to cause happiness, as well as heartache. Sadly, love never seems to be much of a concern to any of the characters in *The House of Mirth*. Marriage is not viewed as a promise to make a life-long commitment to someone that you love, but is instead treated as a business deal for financial and social benefits. This is why Lily sees Simon Rosedale as a potential suitor; he has money and would provide for Lily the life she desires. Throughout the novel, Selden and Lily avoid the obvious fact that they love each other because they are not financially and socially suited for each other. Tragically, it is not until the end of the novel when Lily says to Selden that she “refused it (his love) because I was a coward (Wharton 250),” they both realize how much they love each other. Emotional fulfillment is an important characteristic of happiness, which cannot be achieved without some type of love from a person who cares about you. This is why Lily is depressed instead of joyful at the end of the novel; she and Selden were never able to marry for fear of the consequences they would see in society.

Happiness is a very difficult term to define, yet it is clear when someone is happy or depressed. The struggle between happiness and depression is very apparent at the end of the novel when Lily overdoses and dies. The desire for material things that she thought could give her happiness actually destroyed her. She does not give true love a chance, but instead seeks fake friends and wealth. Lily Bart’s story is a mystery that hopefully inspires *The House of Mirth*’s audience to realize that there are more ways to find happiness than in material goods.